Breathing Machine

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Chapter 1: Advent

A luminescent green prompt blinks softly at me like an eye. I'm in the basement, and there is the humming of machines. In an alcove, the clothes dryer repeats a soft, rhythmic thudding. I curl up, so my toes don't touch the chilly floor.

There's no disk in the drive. I left it empty on purpose, an open mouth crowned with an angry red eye. Its inside parts stutter and whirr within their beige casing. A sound barks from it like a scolding, but I already know it won't hurt me.

Everything is green lines, green light. An altar, a yawning vacuum of black, glassy space, a box with a screen, and on the screen there's a tiny, vivid green rectangle flashing slowly in place. I press my little face up closer to the monitor, and I can see the flashing rectangle is built of tiny, impeccable lines etched one atop the other, the lines themselves comprised of infinitesimal dots.

I stare, and I let my eyes sting and flood. With my nose smudging the glass, the blinking rectangle seems haloed in violet and white. I pretend I can see each fine laser-green etching, each pointelle stutter to life one at a time. The rectangle dies, is born, dies, is born.

It's a cursor. It indicates a command line, and it's waiting for me.

At five years old I know this much: An arcane language lives inside this box. The computer can understand things, so long as I put them to it in exactly the right way. I type words, names, and then random strings of nonsense. I want a reply.

I always get the same answer: the phrase SYNTAX ERROR IN 10, spat onto the screen like a wrist-slap, a dark mantra, prickling my nape. I don't know what a syntax is, or why the ten, but I know from ERROR that I haven't cracked the riddle. The sphinx that lives in the space that opens up when there's no disk in the drive will not answer.

I'd mash the keyboard in fury. Sometimes when I did that, the machine would beep, and the screen would pile up with white, impossible sigils, whorls and brackets, and lock there. The mad static of some unknowable mind.

My neighbor Charlotte's father was a scientist. At her house, I would haul enormous manuals on programming language and calculus down from high shelves and try, to no avail, to make sense of them. I caressed their thin pages, piqued to trembling by their foreign language, and that was enough. The act of pretending to read them was fundamentally more exciting than whatever hard work they might have contained.

I didn't like hard work, and as such I spent a lot of grade school consigned to a hallway bench, for discipline. It was wrought of smooth black wood, an airbrush painting of fruit on its winged back, accented, maybe, with gold. I had to sit there, writing my name in little puddles of tears, because I threw temper tantrums over long division. You have to learn math, they told me, you're going to need math, come on, you can do it – and I had no skill at it, no patience for it, no willingness to learn, even though I knew even by six, seven years old that without the goddamn math, I'd never unlock the machines.

I would occasionally try hard, first lavishing on the preparations of my materials. I needed three pencils, a husband and wife and baby pencil sharpened to their respective appropriate sizes, and then they'd need a pet eraser. Then I'd take the family to my task, dutifully concentrating: I meticulously kept the fat-bellied sixes and leering number nines tidily in their grid boxes, sketched everything very slowly and thoughtfully.

Even then, no matter what, I'd come up with some dangling remainder, some horrific red pen line slashing my earnest effort. *I hate this, I'm going to die*, said little me, throwing Baby Pencil.

You aren't going to die, the teacher said.

I am too, I have appendicitis, said I, having learned about appendicitis from a computer game about surgery. The game had made me want to become a surgeon, and when I told my third-grade teacher I was going to become a surgeon, she said I'd better get good at math if I wanted to excel in medical school.

Instead, I gave up upon my fledgling dream of internal medicine. I rolled around in a melodrama of agony, and then I got sent to the hallway bench.

The precision language of computers and programming might as well have been magic spells. Trying to brute-force my way into arcane conversation with machines was like feeling my way along a dark closet wall hoping to stumble into Narnia. I did plenty of that fumbling for Narnia, too: This button, this ritual, this combination of objects would – oh, it had to, it *must* – let me escape this little world, where everyone yelled at me about math.

I promised my cousin we could teleport to a museum at night if we said the right words. I promised my sister we'd fight crime just as soon as I could build a portable AI, promised the playground children there were invisible tribes in the woods. We would summon mermaids if we arranged the stones just so.

I feared the word "no", its very self. I hated to be thwarted. By the time I was in fourth grade, the teacher had already called my parents more than once to say they did not think I could tell fantasy from reality.

I could tell. I *could*. I just didn't *want* to. I don't want to*, I don't want to*, I wailed, marched out to the hallway bench. Again.

My earliest memories are of the breathing machines, and they promised me from the time I was born that anything could exist, that all things were solvable, that anything could be brought into striking, vector-lined reality if you had imagination enough. That there was always someplace else to go than here, where I had to do math or wear a neon scrunchie for dance class.

My father had a "home technology" column in the Boston Globe, in the early 1980s when technology in the home was a novelty in and of itself. He wrote about hi-fis, and somehow that led to an uncurated heap of press materials barraging our house continually. We got hardware, software, plastic-wrapped boxes the size, thickness and weight of novels with dramatic sci-fi cover paintings. Vast, elaborate box art on the outside, clumsily-blipped eight-bit shorthand adventures inside.

Dad thought I should learn computers as a child, so as to be employable as an adult. My access to them was virtually uninhibited, except for when I'd get yelled at for accidentally erasing this or that. Otherwise I was constantly enshrined in front of the Apple][e, mashing keys, engaged in lawless, experimental dialogue with a machine.

From the mysterious boxes piled into our office closet I'd prized black, floppy disks with bright labels and sticky, flimsy black-tape bellies I'd learned never to touch. Each disk was shorthand for an adventure – they were called things like Critical Mass, Mystery House, Ring Quest. Blade of Blackpoole, Kabul Spy, Death in the Caribbean.

Those old things were blunt objects, the kind that make you think about how many tiny corners must have existed all over the surface of the very first wheel. Slowly, a line drawing loads, etching a graphic abstraction of a path, a house, a forest into the black mirror of your boxy computer screen. You are an international spy. You must find the wizard. You are standing outside the house. You are on a path facing EAST. Things like that would be all you were given to know about yourself and the world.

You would type in "N" for North, and often YOU CAN'T GO THAT WAY would be the stern rebuke. "GO NORTH," you'd patiently essay, and if you were lucky you'd get a line or two about how the mountains barred your way, or how the impassable woods sprawled forever in that direction. "CLIMB TREES," I would insist. "CLIMB THE MOUNTAINS."

"YOU CAN'T DO THAT," insisted the world inside the machine, or "I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

Some games understood climbing, some did not. Some let you press "I" to view your inventory (a lamp, a letter, or nothing whatsoever) and some required you type the entire word, INVENTORY. I learned so many words from games: GULLY, SLUICE, BRAZIER, ADUMBRATE, OGRESS, EGRESS (which I thought was another kind of ogre).

And for a child who hated to hear "no" so badly, never did I hear it so eloquently than from the leaden mouths of those ancient worlds. Their blunt denials that kept me up at night, the locked gate whose key I could not locate, the vile and crudely-animated manticore whose appetite I couldn't figure out how to

slake, the endless and constant grisly deaths I couldn't manage to avoid.

So often, it was a matter of the right answer *and* the precise right phrasing. These games were finicky about their syntax – "TIE ROPE," you'd demand, and "TO WHAT," it would ask, and "TO TREE" would confuse it, but merely answering "TREE" would not. It was always, always possible that you had the right answer to the puzzle, but the wrong words, the wrong verbs.

At seven years old I'd sit bolt upright on the verge of sleep, struck suddenly by a solution in the dark of my room, waiting for morning and the next attempt with uncontainable fever.

I'd imagine what new lands lay beyond the sequences I couldn't complete, so fervently that even now I can't remember if they were real. My neighbor Charlotte (of the scientist father and the basement full of spellbooks) and I would constantly plot, collaborate and imagine, spending those hot summer afternoons when school was out sat side by side at a machine.

At her house lived a monolithic, primitive PC the size of a refrigerator. It was 1988, probably, and there was one particular pizza-sized disk we'd tuck into its shelf-sized jaw at every opportunity. At the command prompt she'd type ADVENT to run it, like a religious hymn.

This particular game was called Colossal Cave Adventure, a text-only network of caves and treasures that sprawled like a tomb of hieroglyphs, so truly massive and confounding that I've not solved it to this day, which feels right.

Today, digital historians call Colossal Cave Adventure the "granddaddy" of text adventure games. A spelunker named Will Crowther made it for his daughters, to help show them his cave-crawling pastime as he endured a divorce with his wife. His work parented Charlotte and I all those summers, in a different era, when it felt like we children could lock ourselves away and go absent for hours without making our parents afraid.

Much of our playtime was spent concentrating on the game itself, rubber-cementing reams of printer paper end to end to map the cave and its strange place names: Bedquilt; the Hall of the Mountain King; mazes of identical, twisting passages, an alcove where a hollow voice cried "Plugh". The virtual cave network contained a Ming vase, a set of batteries, a bent rod crowned with a rusty star, all kinds of objects to be collected for some inexplicable purpose.

The rest of the time, we tumbled forth into our real-life suburban wildlands, the scraggly woods that lay between one grassy yard and another, the tiny duck pond that looms large in my memory. Everywhere, it seemed, we saw a puzzle, a mystery. Why was that bundle of twigs leaned against an old oak? Why did some stones glitter when you struck them, and others stank of gunpowder instead? Under this log, a salamander, and under that, a nest of beetles. There were loamy, unseen living things always scuttling just out of reach. We left notes and signs wherever we could get away with it, and it felt like important work.

This knothole could be a button. Behold this twig stripped of its bark and written in by termites – a magic staff! The things that lay beyond our reach in the digital world seemed to mirror and echo the natural mysteries we found when we played outdoors. At the end of the day, I'd be in trouble for the mud on my shoes or for coming home a little too late, but I always tromped into the front door feeling like I was almost, almost somewhere. Like I'd almost solved it, whatever "it" really was.

There were, there had to be, gorgeous infrastructures beyond what I could reach, just waiting for me to know the right words. The whole world a blinking prompt, daring me, ENTER COMMAND.

Chapter 2: The Waste Land

When Apple's early wave of Macintosh computers came out, you'd start one up and see a boxy little icon of a computer, smiling. If your system crashed, or if you did something wrong, there would be a picture of a bomb, or of an icon that looked sad and sick. I remember seeing an old magazine advertisement with that Macintosh icon smiling peaceably from a monitor, and underneath it, in sloppy mouse-cursive, HELLO.

One day my mother called me into the office in a terrible panic. The computer screen had gone black, and tiny white pixel fireworks were bursting all over it. It was just the screensaver, but she didn't know that – how smart little me felt when I nudged the mouse (single-button, fat ivory lozenge), and showed her that everything was just fine.

You could also set your screensaver to show toasters with wings of bread, flapping peacefully in diagonal flight paths across black space. The absurdity of a flying toaster seemed to parody our growing reliance on computers – I know I gently patted the cheerful old Macintosh, whose drive, hardware and screen all lived in the same tidy cube, when it agreed to run a program I desperately needed it to.

My early childhood glowed green as the forests, black as glass. And then the color spectrum changed, giving way to the black-and-white of late 1980s Macintosh interfaces, the rainbow prisms of CD-ROM discs.

We got reams of CDs in the mail, bearing labels proclaiming, "99 FREE SHAREWARE GAMES!" All of them were hobbyist work, clumsily hand-sketched line art and box-shaped rooms. Most of them were broken. I didn't care. The first time I ever heard and remembered Beethoven's Ode To Joy was at the start screen of one of these games, blaring at me from the tinny speakers. I'm not ever going to forget that.

There was a game called The Manhole, with sparse dialogue, where the only interaction was clicking through a Lewis Carroll-like playground of tiny boats, giant beanstalks, and seahorses that danced inside a roll top desk. Its creators would go on to make the seminal Myst.

It was the broken games I truly loved. They all had weird version numbers (1.1.3?), and were stamped all

over with the aliases of dejected bedroom weirdoes asking you to mail in five dollars, sometimes plaintively, sometimes cynically. Even the things I thought of as professional software were essentially the same, I now know. One game scolded me to "brush up on The Waste Land", when I couldn't solve its door puzzle. What did that mean, was it some other game?

I didn't get these rogue developers' dirty jokes either, their love letters to the seedier parts of America, their imperfect puns. They all used the same simple development tools, borrowed from the same free repository of unlicensed sounds. Nearly everyone used the same flat, gargling scream for enemy characters, whether some downed thug or stalking evil, and sampled the same throat-tearing, shrill gloating witch laugh for certain aggressors. Stamped on my brain, laughing at me forever.

As a result, the black-and-white HyperCard games of that age all constellate into some kind of collective experience. Whereas ADVENT and its forbidding ilk made me dream of all the treasures and beautiful lands barred beyond the word "no", these games made me enamored of the faraway cities of adults. They promised me that there were places I could visit as long as I learned to weigh and calculate my "yes."

I didn't finish any of these games, only trod and re-trod their opaque routes. Noisy, spotty, buggy, flippant black-and-white games, definitely, definitely created by Cool Adults in faraway Big Cities – opening their beers, gathering their cigarettes, and witch-squawk laughing at me. Some of the games made gunshot noises, especially the one where I tried to steal a cow, even though I always died in the attempt. Or maybe I was able to bring the cow to the moon? I don't remember now.

The more legitimate games had copy protection: They shipped with special red plastic lenses, or code wheels, or guidebooks with letter puzzles, and you needed them to unlock the software. This felt like its own kind of mystery-work – the number of dog-eared manuals or secret cards I lost and had to mine from memory! And the number that I lost and then couldn't remember, midway through an adventure before it brought me up against the wall of no, hunched over the keys trying to break in. Sometimes I wasn't the one solving the caper, sometimes I was the line-drawn figure trying to enact it.

A particularly delicious sensation: Cracking the code without even knowing why. The copy protection for Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards, a chunky, chirpy 1987 computer game about a luckless loser hunting for sex in a seedy simulacrum of Las Vegas, was a set of history quiz questions designed to test whether or not the player was adult enough for the subject matter. Through trial and error, you could eventually sort the right answers. You could eventually break it open, even when you didn't know exactly what you were talking about.

Not that it helped me much. I thought "lounge lizards" were real lizards. I accumulated a new vocabulary word, "prophylactic," from the game, but I didn't know exactly what it meant.

Only in games, only with machines, was I struck with hunger and joy by being denied things, by having mysteries dangled outside of my obtaining. Larry's sex-logic was another mystery: The language of adults, the sticky undertow of grown-up cities, another place I couldn't go, couldn't touch, couldn't

understand.

Around the same time, on the Macintosh I typed a 50 page novel about how my parents won the lottery and bought me a horse and I flew off all by myself to be in the Kentucky Derby (I won!) and I stayed in a hotel with Charlotte. The dot matrix printer, gargling and squealing and chugging and panting, took quite a long time to spit it all out, with clip art of a pony rampant doing service as cover art. I watched it all happen: Grinding plastic teeth, the pages still gleaming with black spit.

One of my favorite games was called Hotel Caper, and it had you chase down gangsters in a city hotel – the puzzles were simplistic, the art was terrible, but it made an impression on me: For the first time I thought of landed, urbane mysteries, and less of the fantastical – fewer dragons and relics, more hidden safes and criminal files.

I *had* to move to New York, I realized, and become a detective. I pulled a map of Manhattan out of my grandmother's National Geographic magazine, and pasted it on the wall of my playroom. I printed out screenshots from Hotel Caper, and made pretend dossiers of the villains I would chase down once I arrived there.

My cousin, who was my co-detective, and I decided this plan would work best if we had a Sega Game Gear. The marketing to kids around video games had begun to take a distinct turn, then: Glossy magazines full of bright laser grids, skateboards, spiked hair. *Raaaadical.* We believed in the neon-nineties vision of the future, where we were basically just about to get hoverboards and become heroes. We were allowed to collect and dissect hardware boards studded with tiny future-cities, chips and infinitesimal spots of soldering. We romanticized transistor-bulbs, made them state capitals, and above all we were allowed to twist rainbow wires and build circuits to nowhere, circuits on instinct and aesthetic, useless.

In 1993, my cousin and sister and I watched a Sonic The Hedgehog cartoon, where Sonic's sidekick Sally was assisted by a portable AI named Nicole. It shouldn't be too hard to make one of those, we thought.

It was in our plans, our notes, our basement boxes full of junked motherboards. The plans felt real.

One night, my whole family ate at some restaurant on a major thoroughfare; as we left, the sun was setting, sliced in two by the overpass. I could walk to the gravel-limed highway's edge, littered with broken glass, and stand beneath a green highway sign. I'd never been so close to a sign like that before; I'd only drove past, in my parents' car. Now I could touch its metal legs, crane my neck up and read its reflective letters pointing the way to the major veins of American transit. NEW YORK, it promised, with an arrow toward an on-ramp.

You are at the roadside. New York is to the SOUTH. Every little hair on my little baby neck pricked.

Standing beneath a highway sign among powdered beer bottles, I thought, if we only had a talking AI, if we only owned a portable machine and a hoverboard, we could go to New York *right now* and solve a

hotel caper, and stop the gangsters. I could almost touch the sign, but not quite.

Chapter 3: Hieroglyphs

My dad let me have a hand-me-down Powerbook laptop when I was eleven or twelve. The thing I remember most about this machine (besides its role in keeping my innermost thoughts, my diary, across years of secret and now-defunct Word docs), is how when I stroked its screen with my fingertip, a bright prismatic comet would appear, a temporary wound opening up and leaving a fading, smoky contrail in its place.

I loved it so. I still hurt when I think of it, a tablet of my crucial years; even if it can be found again, it can never be revived. Its drives are defunct and unreadable.

I used it to play Scarab of Ra, a primitive roguelike comprised of blank and endless corridors dotted with collectible charcoal, melons, scarabs and staves. The deeper you penetrated into the maze, the greater the risk – thieving monkeys, lions, devious traps could spawn around any corner.

Games like these were another way to engage with the opaque language of machines, to brute-force myself one way or another through systems I couldn't wholly understand. In Scarab of Ra, you earned experience quantified by adult-sounding archaeology degrees: Bachelor's. Masters. I could become a doctor, somehow. I visualized the arcane rankings of American university, starring teachers floored by my success.

When I got frustrated, I gave up, and took to nosing around the silvereen comet-tailed file system of the hand-me-down Powerbook to see what my father had installed before. This entailed its own wormhole of pathways, unfamiliar icons and unstable programs. The risk of a system crash was ever-present.

Yet I felt confident this maze would hold something else for me to talk with. My father was becoming an expert, being interviewed in broadsheets and on television about things I didn't really understand: *viruses*, made by impossibly-distant master architects. They named their progeny things like *Michaelangelo*. At one point, Dad wrote a book called *The Underground Guide to Computer Security,* and I understood about a third of the words in that title. Apparently viruses like Michaelangelo made computers vulnerable, unpredictable, silly.

I quietly fell in love with the cloistered and quickly-obsolescing Powerbook, disconnected and safe. Why would I need to know what *viruses* were, when my little computer had installed on it a primitive voice program, which could read aloud whatever black block text I fed it – unplugged, surreal mechanized tonality, crude inflection, delightful? You could choose a male voice or a female voice, and the latter had a concavity to it, crowned with sibilance, that made it sound alternately maternal and seductive.

I loved experimenting with it. I could make those robot-voices say anything I wanted, without fear of

reprisal, which was new. Many of the adventure games of my childhood knew that your average person, wrestling with an invisible system, would eventually type vulgar words, and so contained provisions to chide you if you cursed. The strangely-pitched robot voices had no such reservations.

What a control high. You could talk to the machine and the machine could talk back, albeit with your own words, like a parrot – more capable than the parakeet I'd had as a child's pet, a little bird named Blue Chip who was utterly disinterested in conversation.

I could pretend the machine had invented its own chunky, flat little way to speak to me, but already my imagination was only going so far. By the time I was ten or eleven years old I had become aware of a concept called Internet – my father talked about it in phrases I could loosely connect but not fully understand –

Wait, I'm sorry. Let's slow down a moment: I just remembered something else.

I'm three or four. Cassette audio recording of my father and I; he's explaining to me that he uses the tape recorder to do interviews for his job. "Hello, Mr. Businessman, what did you do today," he demonstrates as a sample journalistic question, and I dutifully reply, "write."

It's quite plausible that I did write as a very little girl, but more likely I was role-playing along with the perceived expectations, answering as my Dad, defined by the job of "writer". *Write* is what Dad did today, thought I, very small.

On the recording, Dad tells me I, too, can talk to the tape recorder. "Hi," I say to it. And then again, expectantly, "Hi."

Even in the first-ever recorded instance of my speaking to a machine, I expected it to answer. All I knew about Dad's internet, at first, was that it would answer.

I found a primitive old program somewhere on the Powerbook called America Online. An early version, maybe even the first one. I knew it was for *getting to the internet*, though I didn't know exactly how, what. I was dimly aware it needed some kind of connection to something else, and that I couldn't just load the program from where I would be bundled with my machine in bed. This did not, of course, stop me from trying.

I believed in magic, of course, and wasn't technology as mysterious as fantasy? The stuff of sprawling paperback novels where the veils between worlds blurred, and you could become a hero in a strange land just by accidentally touching something, by being in the right place at the right time, by knowing the right word to open a previously-unseen door.

I'd breathlessly load the America Online program on my monolithic Powerbook, in the dark of my room Three pictures would pop up on a loading screen. A skeleton key, a logo, and… a globe, maybe? I can't remember. In my memory they become coarse alien buttons, indigo unreality. I know for sure there was

a vein of *lightning* that moved from one icon to the next, always stopping before reaching the final third. ERROR.

I knew, I knew something was missing, but I continued to try regardless. I knew the difference between the real and the imagined and chose to ignore it. What if I pressed something at exactly the right time? What if I found a hidden panel of some kind on the hardware itself, like the time I found a terrifying reset-knob within a pinhole on the Powerbook's back, pressed it with a paperclip and evinced a dissonant chiming song that I'd never hear again?

What if I held my breath, what if I counted, kept my eyes shut. What if I prayed.

Nothing worked. Because I had *no connection*, that image of a key struck by digital lightning would always be where my adventure would end.

Chapter 4: Smothered

Dialing modem. A sequence of guttural, choking shrieks, a hiccup, a pause, some single eye in the hardware fluttering as if it contained an insect. Shrill chirps, a nebulous staticky monster croaking to get out. Just when you think it's done, it screams again.

You would occasionally misdial a phone, and be unexpectedly confronted with that staticky wailing on the other end, warped by the distance and receiver static. What? Oh, you called a fax machine. You phoned up a strange old dodo of a machine that went extinct before it ever learned how to answer you with anything other than a piercing, urgent cry. Before the last one died, its species had littered countless cubicle mazes with its nesting material: reams upon reams of unwanted local restaurant menus in gaunt, spidery print that slanted madly on the page.

People just a little younger than me will never know that sound as anything other than the howl of a finished age. People born now might never have occasion to hear it at all. It's kind of a tragedy.

I'd be crouched by the modem in the dark. It'd be late. It's not that I wasn't supposed to be awake. I was 13 years old, and no one could really tell me when to go to bed. I'd started nurturing the spark of an idea in my casing that no one, really, ought to tell me anything, anymore.

The spark looked a lot like the red and green light patterns flickering across the face of the modem in my father's office, like the lucent phone cable anemone tangling across the floor. Find me then: holding my breath, holding still.

When the modem made that sound, that treacherous hissing scream, I smothered it in my pillow, eyes screwed tight, waiting for it to fall silent. So I could be undiscovered, alone.

 The first time I was allowed to use internet newsgroups, it was like suddenly noticing it was dark enough

to see stars. All at once, a startling array of possibilities seemed to erupt in front of me. I could browse an impossible library of public bulletin boards, on everything from music to poetry to alien-hunting to nihilism to Sailor Moon –

Oh, Sailor Moon. It was this anime television series that's now old enough to be having a comeback among young twenty-somethings. Old enough to be re-evaluated as a queer hero story, a subversion of "gaze" for all us kids growing up in small Luddite towns with oppressive norms. Where I was from, no one went online, they went to field hockey practice and church.

By waking up at 6 AM and tuning an old TV box to some double-digits station, through a thin fog of snow, I got grab hold of a thin filament of counter-culture. I'd always catch the tail end of this early-morning broadcast preacher show, where a white-haired man grinned beatifically and said, "every *day* in His Word's a good day."

And then, right after: This horrendous dub of a Japanese cartoon about crimefighting schoolgirls in pleats, gender-bending heroes, pretty men flinging roses and gazing out rainy windows through wreaths of sparkles. I was transfixed.

A reporter for the Boston Globe came over to interview me as some kind of Patient Zero for the budding "Japanimation craze" in America, printing a photograph of me in my room surrounded by the black and white dot matrix Sailor Moon pictures I'd printed off the internet and colored in with pencil.My picture collction, featuring waxy girl heroes and a wicked mirror-queen hard-scribbled in half-remembered green and purple, felt subversive.

I was excited and proud.

The day the article ran I walked to the entrance of school over damp, discarded newsprint wallpapering gutters and grates. Everyone had brought their copy of the paper to school to make fun of me. I was surprised for a moment, and then I realized I shouldn't have been. I don't really have to say more about what I felt, do I?

Flee back into late-night, then, my little hands strangling a shrieking and green-eyed modem-animal, smothering it with blankets and pillows so that no one would hear it and send me back to bed. It connects. The part that was missing when I was younger is now *present*, an electric aura that excites me with every closed circuit. A black-and-white wheel whirls feverishly as the machine downloads my Eudora mail.

Even back then, no parent let their preteen use their real name on the internet. I wouldn't have picked my real name even if I'd been allowed. Bless my parents ("god bless them all every *day*," as that preacher used to intone) – with all sincerity, thank you, parents, for letting me pick "Delilah", a temptress' name culled eagerly from Hebrew School. At the crux of my adolescence I was delilah@alexander.terranet.com. I could never-ever forget it, the secret name that let me interlope among Usenet boards like rec.arts.poetry, alt.music.nirvana, and rec.arts.sailormoon.

There was life after the preachers, life after school, life after the whirling binary black and white, and here I came squalling and red into all of it, from the dark corners of my father's office where I prayed the real me would never be found.

Chapter 5: Whiskers

You are running home from the bus stop in slate-gray, damp early Massachusetts winter, wearing a Jansport backpack lurching with heavy texts. High school freshmen all have giant backpacks. No one's home when you get there. You have an hour's precious window to be Delilah all alone.

First, a particular ritual of machines: Check the telephone answering machine for its single cyclopean red blink. It is never for you – it's a landscaper, a dental office secretary, a friend of your mother's. Occasionally it's the high school. Experience a lurch in your gut and hit DELETE without letting the message finish playing. With finality you jab the machine, y our fingertip crowned with chipped black polish. DELETE-DELETE.DELETE.

Stand in front of the fridge, a monolith that sighs in your face. Engage the microwave. Eat too much, guiltily, standing up, half in and half out of cabinets, ravenous teenage appetite knitted tightly with the pains of all kinds of growth. Meticulously leave no sign of your presence; erase your data, no debt to be accountable for later. Run up the stairs, two at a time.

Bring the computer to life, wake its black face, wind the thin jellyfish-leg of a telephone cord around to the toothy plastic wall socket. Click one piece into another piece. The modem screams and howls as always, but there's no one to hear it right now. There's just you, watching the tiny rectangular window that promises you a connection is being made. Dialing, establishing, testing, whatever the phases, you hold your breath.

Think back: you held your breath *tight*. You opened your little Eudora mailbox and prayed for something to be there. You usually had one piece of mail. Sometimes two. On a good day there would be three, and you'd meditate with anticipation upon the black bar that stuttered along, telling you about download progress. 1 of 3. 2 of 3. 3 of 3. Hold tight.

This was what you waited all the long school day for, the interminable bus ride. Some days, it felt like you'd been waiting all your life.

I must have made a lot of friends on the newsgroups, daring brief lines of communication with strangers on text-only bulletin boards that nested subjects and replies. A trawl through Google Groups' uncomfortably long-lived archives while researching this book reveals that young Delilah took the title of alt.destroy.the.earth with an excess of seriousness and chastised everyone involved.

Delilah apparently also asked for the chord progression that would allow her to play "Little Things" by

Bush on the guitar her parents bought her for her 13th birthday, and, uppity, she corrected a British user for misspelling (she assumed), "shite."

I started a thread on alt.music.nirvana in 1995 entitled, "I Miss Relevant Discussion."

Well. Probably I didn't make a lot of friends. But I did sort of fall in love.

Fourteen is an age where you can have not one but two gutting, interminable wrecking-ball crushes battering round your little insides. You stare out your suburban window at sun-dappled, manicured lawns full of boring children playing with boring toys, and something secret and grown-up flickers to life inside you, makes your gaze distant.

I don't think the improbability, impractiality of my long-distance internet love affairs occurred to me. Like everything else I did my keyboard, the people I corresponded with were mostly imaginary, living inside a magic circle whose perimeter was too vast to chart.

Through the rec.arts.poetry board I met an older man, 30 or 31 years old, if memory serves. At the time, such an age seemed incredibly old, such as to give me pause.

Nonetheless I chose – nobly, I felt at the time – to overlook such mortifying superficialities and pursue what felt like a romantic correspondence with this fellow poet, who was *so* old. Surely a fellowship in internet poetry was more important than anything else.

After all, I also thought my own age was also a superficial detail I didn't need to disclose, and I focused on sounding as grown-up as possible. I was mature enough to help colonize this bodiless digital thought-plane. What purpose did the boring details of my skin-and-bones life serve, anyway?

I can't to this day remember the substance of my correspondence with the fellow poet, except that it was chaste, never shocking or discomfiting, just romantic, flirtatious, Going Somewhere. I had a little reservation, though – what if my new internet boyfriend was, like, old like my *Dad*? At fourteen, thirty-something seemed like practically my Dad's age!

What if, I wondered, he had gray hair? Surely his body wasn't the smooth, abstracted elfin landscape of my dolls and my fantasy comics; at his age, surely there were paternal ruffs of hair and flesh. Maybe even a beard.

I mean. I was an ageless creature of thought that lived in the digital plane, of course, and things like age didn't really matter to me, I professed internally. But just in case they kind of did matter, I also carried a torch for a college student I had met on a Pearl Jam newsgroup. Mostly because he was a college student from Canada who had his *own radio show*, which to me was just swoon-inducingly cool, and his name was Jeremy, like the Pearl Jam song, which seemed to be an omen of some kind.

Jeremy didn't respond to my coy missives with anything other than strict, pragmatic music fandom, and

wrote back to me much more rarely than the fellow poet. So I kept up writing with the latter, attentively. Any day I woke up early for Sailor Moon on snowy local TV, suffered through small-town high school gym class, shop class, Home Economics, ran home after the bus and had no email from the great beyond was a bleak day. Writing emails to someone would at least increase the likelihood of getting one back. Guess it was you, Old Guy.

Eventually the fellow poet and I began to escalate into arguing about something. I can't remember why, and I can't remember what it is I said, only that he chastised me for being immature, and I replied something to the effect of, "well, of *course* I am, I'm only fucking 14."

To his credit, he was mortified, apologized profusely, said something like he "meant no disrespect," a sentiment that confused me at the time. He said he'd thought I was "at least in college," and as I distinctly recall, he wrote, "me and my middle-aged ass."

Well, I thought, and now you know, and everything is all right and we can go back to saying sweet things to one another, and a little note from you in my Eudora Mail inbox after school. But the fellow poet stopped replying.

I became annoyed and emailed again – after all, I never held his age against him, even though he was sure to be old and awful and disgusting, so why should he punish me for mine? No matter what I did, "me and my middle-aged ass" would be the last I heard from my fellow poet. I was slightly deflated, mostly confused, but had a child's short memory, the stunningly-resilient psyche of an adolescent. I felt sort of relieved, as if I'd dodged some kind of bullet.

Several months later, Old Guy surfaced on the poetry newsgroup again, presenting something I read distinctly as a whimsical love poem. It referred to his "whiskers" (aha, I thought, I was right about the horrible old beard), and contained the phrase "hop all over your back." I read the poem closely to see if it might be about me, Delilah, but no evidence presented itself. Apparently, I thought sourly, his *totally* bearded, middle-aged ass was busy crushing someone else with the weight of its years.

I learned that I distinctly preferred imagining my digital friends as unreal people, or like surrealistic video game characters who could never come out of their glowing box no matter how much I believed in them.

I liked the college student better, anyway.

Recently I had the sudden whim to Google the first and last name of the romantic poet, which I still remember. I found the very grey-bearded author of a lot of pro-life books with web copy focused on "taking responsibility for the sex act". It can't be the same man. It just can't.

I also Googled the college student. Now he's a music journalist. Wicked.

Chapter 6: Hell

When is the last time you said "www". Out loud, 'double-yew double-yew double-yew-dot'. Unironically.

World Wide Web. The phrase is so quintessential to the lexicon of the modern West that it's funny to go *hey, wait, let's pin that down* – World Wide Web. Some spider-kin network that spreads around the entire world.

How far did the internet's fuzzy-legged arachnotendrils reach when I was 14? 16? Not the whole *world.* Not even every house I knew in suburbia had the internet, at first. That phrase, that innocently-spoken *World Wide!* was a promise of potential, not reality.

And the early Web was a simulacrum of reality, a dim Western fantasy of virtual space cobbled together from chunky, artifacted graphics. You browsed the web with Netscape Navigator, like a starship captain (modern browsers still bear the rust taste of frontier spirit, with names like Explorer, Safari). Primitive chat lobbies were called things like The Meeting Room, the Lobby, the Cafe, as if you were always, always entering a real place, there to meet real people.

This concept of the Web as a literal place extended to its unfinished spaces: UNDER CONSTRUCTION banners would blink slowly from unfinished websites, cartoonish, hard-hatted moles poking up from manholes.

Fat navigation buttons showed arrows, pictures of steaming coffee cups (to delineate places where you could have a chat). Go forward, go back. The idea of the Web as actual geography still persists in the corners of how we use it today. We still refer to "sites", metaphors for real space. Except the whimsy is gone. There's no more of the childish magic that birthed "webrings" – like faery rings, groups of affiliated websites you could travel through in order.

You left your signature wherever you traveled, so that other people could know you'd been there. So that the keepers of a webring on an obscure topic half a world away could know that someone had been there. Sign my guestbook, they begged. Guestbooks. Little virtual visitors logs. At one time it seemed almost every website had one. Now, none of them do.

Exploring these spaces was half luck, half skill. You found the sites you wanted by ambient clicking, a zen-like pilgrimage through forum signatures and sidebars. Or you could use primitive search engines, of which there were many: Lycos. Metacrawler, dominated by a graphic of a giant hairy spider. Dogpile, Excite, Infoseek, Alta Vista.

Each service would return a different sequence of results than another, and so you would visit all of them in sequence, type in what you wanted to find, never able to expect the same recommendations. Knowing and memorizing web addresses became its own kind of lore, code passed along in whispers.

You would write down web addresses for the friends in school long-form, with all the slashes and underscores and numbers. You might as well write them down, because if you wanted to email someone

a link, their email address was liable to be just as long, to contain just as many dots and dashes, the code of ancient navigators adrift on a rough, monitor-blue, primordial sea.

Many of these places had strange names. Many were Geocities sites. That hosting service would have spent its cachet many times over before I realized it was pronounced GEO CITIES, like *cities of the globe*, and not Geocities as in rhymes with *curiosities.* Angelfire. Was there such a service as Dragonfire, too, or did I dream it? I could Google it now, but you must understand that would not be in the spirit of this work.

You could invent website URLs (Uniform Resource Locator, and if that isn't a Holodeck-era acronym I don't know what is) - and see if they worked. I did this often, to varying results. www dot what you need dot com.

By the age of sixteen, I'd made an ill-advised decision to join the junior varsity basketball cheerleading squad. I had a rental uniform with a navy blue pleated skirt we were forced to wear properly to school on game days. Sailor Moon I was not.

My coaches spent a lot of their time lavishing attention on a cheerful younger girl named Cammy who seemed to be defying the laws of high school as I understood them in every way – I guilted daily over the packaged snacks I fervently inhaled in my desperate hour alone after school, yet she was somehow better at cheerleading despite being, gasp, fatter than me. Like, *way* fatter*.* Cammy was likely to be picked out for Varsity. I was not keeping up, no matter how many Kate Moss CKOne perfume ads I pasted on my bedroom wall.

It was around this time I came home one evening after a grueling cheerleading practice I was neither athletic nor sexually-confident enough to correctly execute. I opened up Netscape Navigator or some such thing, and I typed in HELL.COM.

I received no directions, no buttons. no signposts pointing my route to a cozy lobby cafe. No guestbook. Only a stark black screen with the silhouette of a hovering arrow, pointing down. I could see my reflection in the monitor. That single mysterious emblem waited for me to click on it.

Thrill: the distinct sense of having fallen through the cracks of the innocent and orderly. I must have, I thought, told the computer to do something that it wasn't supposed to do. I must have given it it room to speak to me, just like when I was an unburdened child being growled by a red-eyed disk drive.

I clicked the arrow. It dissolved slowly, and then I was somewhere else, I felt.

I tumbled through endless looping audiovisual glitches. The screen would flash alarm sometimes, and at other times it would offer text, or animation, or noise I read as signals*. I found it*, I thought: The underground collective of breathing machines. I only had to figure out the language. Occasionally it asked me to input text. There had to be a password, a magic word.

What kind of domain was this hell.com? A secret society, a living computer? A private collective of

fantasy characters, reaching out to me, enticing me to learn their language? That was always how the old stories worked, wasn't it – one lucky, special child who didn't belong in the land of the mundane someday stumbled through a gap, accidentally sticking upon the precise right combination of things. Or was summoned, selected, and rewarded for their persistence.

I was once again the child who used to pat her way along the walls in her grandmother's closet full of fur coats, hoping to end up in a fantastical snowfield, called upon to be a great heroine. The inexplicable gaps in the glassy face of Consumer Technology had been calling to me since I was young, leaving me with mouthfuls of floppy-disk jargon that had no place at cheerleading practice.

And my preliminary internet forays already had me worried: What if there were no wizards on the internet, only more middle-aged asses who were fairly lazy about answering their email? There had to be something else, something more. I couldn't give up.

On some of those afterschool days, I thought I was getting closer to cracking hell.com's secrets, drawing a visual map of the site in my mind as if its sequences and branching paths really components of a place I was learning. I could chip away at its glassy interface and earn another slice of lurid RGB light, another scotoma of touchable, flickering feedback. As an interactive experience hell.com was dark and unpleasant, but probably all the more compelling to my teenage appetite as a result.

I never met anyone there. I never made realtime contact with an otherworlder, which I imagine must have been my ultimate wish. I remember reading forum-users talking about how hell.com was an "internet art project," an explanation I definitely rejected. If it were just *art*, I thought, then it wouldn't really *mean* anything, wouldn't lead anywhere. It would be an architected simulation, the static project of someone else's imagination, not the land of marriage between the supernatural and the digital I hoped it would be.

I mean. From the moment I read it I knew it was probably artists. But I didn't want to believe it.

Really, the work of artists was everywhere. I often visited another mysterious website that seemed devoted to lifelike jointed animals: Against an azure sky, vivid giraffes of varying sizes clattered and tumbled, making wood-block noises. If you pinned one with the mouse, its segments would swing unpredictably, the animal's neck suddenly becoming loose, its legs flailing as if at the mercy of physics. You could swirl a spindly giraffe around in place like a bag of delicate bones, toss it up with a whoosh of air, and watch the individual sections of its body resolve and coalesce again, delicately. The giraffes would always reconstitute on their feet, continuing their rattly march across the screen. You could not hurt them. That you could touch them at all was enough, really, wondrous, worthy of showing friends.

The internet inevitably became a place of chunky compass roses that bewildered morning news anchors uneasily discussing making a World Wide Web Site for Your Business. They blinked doelike and oblivious while discussing the newfangled concept of "netiquette" (a colon and a parenthesis means a smile, they explained). But the internet still had an underworld lush with musical, touchable wildlife that lived alongside dark and intransible puzzle-temples of its underworld.

Now I know that hell.com, and the giraffes, all of it, was done by artists. I've had it confirmed through so many independent channels. It was early "net.art". I wish I could revisit mysterious hell.com through this lens of understanding, but when I go to the site, I get a blank white screen, the message "domain disabled."

Nonetheless, even now I cycle my cursor across the white space, not quite believing. I'm hunting for a flicker of mystery, a change in my cursor, an asterisk, a prompt, an arrow pointing down.
There's nothing, at least nothing that I can find. I am patting at a blank wall where a door used to be.

Chapter 7: Everything Nothing

Webs are enticing. Nature's finest and most mysterious craftstmanship, its fine lines delicate and hypnotic, made on instinct by a fat-bellied killer. Lace doilies strung among fine grass blades, made for death. Touch a web in its sticky place and you can never get out – you can only wait until a mandible crowned with innumerable scintillating eyes descends upon you. One imagines that spiders suck out the guts, leave the husk.

You can remember the first truly horrific image you ever saw online, can't you?

A man wincing, his face pinched and deformed, seeming to warp against the barrel of an executing gun. A woman spread out in a bathtub, gripping her stockinged thighs, a fount of amber bile arcing as vivid as carved stone from one of her orifices to another. Thirty seconds of a .avi file – a naked woman on all fours blinking doelike from a dark hotel bed. No, wait, a young girl. Younger than young. Oh, my god. Sick. Sick.

Did you seek it out, the sensation of the bottom dropping out from your guts, the wondering *is it real* and *can they really* and *who the fuck*? Did you stumble into it entirely by accident, or through the sin of completely unguarded curiosity? Fascinated or compulsive or impulsive or excited or upset or all or none or both?

Were you daring yourself to see what you could endure, were you tricked by some wily stranger lurking on the other side of a chat window, a sequence of characters you'd come to think of as a person, who one day said to you CLICK HERE?

Can you fully explain it, even now?

Be honest about how you felt. Are you tempted to lie a little even now, when you recount the story of how you saw your first gutting, unsettling, frightening, fascinating image? Your truth is somewhere in between innocent accident and thoughtless compulsion. Maybe there was even an antisocial urge, twitching at the edge of your awarness like a larva. You were among the ragtag lost, testing the boundaries of a new frontier. You wanted to know what there was to see, to find. You wanted to know

how much you could take.

Until you dug into the annals of the web, you had never seen anyone, anything die. Or worse, and worse was suddenly there for you to see. If you didn't see it, you weren't really participating.

Things got dark, darker than hell. It was no game, no art, nothing but a peeler that flayed the wonder off of the mystery of the internet, one nauseating layer at a time. I learned an iron gut. I had to, I reasoned, if the world outside the bounds of what I could see and dream was capable of creating these pictures, videos, stories.

I followed the web's uncanny gossamer into communities that reveled in the disclosure of the grotesque. This way, I could know things that no one in school knew.

There was nowhere else for someone like me to go. I'd had enough of cheerleading before the season was even through. One day a pimply, rat-faced girl named Laura, from the 'wrong side' of dim suburbia, punched me in the face, because that's what there was for us to do. A popular girl, coincidentally also named Laura, suggested I might have fun at the church youth group.

I went along with her once, but my classmates seemed altogether too young to me to have such certainty of devotion: White Clearasil and Noxzema faces upturned to the arcing interior of our tiny town church, singing songs. They really believed it, all this talk of abiding love, even though you could get ostracized in school by girls who said mean things, and even though there was so much death on the internet. Jesus Christ, I thought, and I ran home to the arms of the machine.

Thanks for a nice time, Laura, I thought, while discovering Goatse.cx. Everyone knows what Goatse is now, but back then it was shorthand, a prank. Someday you'd put a foot wrong, on purpose or otherwise, and find it: A man with both hands (one with an oily wedding ring) urgently applied to the constraints of his anal sphincter, a red and leering wormhole that seemed to taunt the limits of the human body.

Oh, gross. Wait, what? Ha, oh, man, look. Look at this. Just look. Don't look. No matter what, don't, never, never click this. I told you, hahaha, I know, right?!

You knew or you didn't. I would be someone who knew, I decided.

I lurked in the realms of the internet intelligentsia, their forums and IRC channels. I discovered collectives of websites about everything and nothing – that's what they called them, E/N, everything/nothing, where in response to the grotesques cropping up constantly at the fringes of our new frontier, people reported dutifully about the personal, the mundane. I loyally visited sites like I Am Happy Blue, ThinkAttack, and aggregators like DotCult. There were so many.

If I could write my own testimonials amid the rapidly-burgeoning fringe internet, then I might really be cool, I might have my own tentpole, flagged stake, in this universe. Even though I was young. Even

though I had no real power, not really. Even though I was frightened, at times, by the things I saw.

I got good at convincing people I was at *least* in college, like I did with the Old Guy poet on Usenet. I got posting accounts at E/N sites. I can't remember what I wrote; everything, nothing. I just remember getting to hang out in a chat channel of fascinating aliases, feeling like I was part of something. I was spending my time with rogue adults, passing as one of them.

Eventually I realized that what I perceived to be my fraud – the fact I was a lying, boring teenager only pretending to be a Cool Adult – was irrelevant. Nobody in those circles ever said who they really were, or how old they were, or from where, beyond the occasional reveal of an unfamiliar city name. I'd stick a pin in the map on our basement corkboard, signaling that I had a friend in that place, of a kind.

I lived there, in the dark, edged limbo of the absurd that the early internet was becoming. For entertainment I browsed photo galleries speckled with commentary from entirely invented personalities, and I watched Shockwave pastiches of chunky graphics set to hyperbolic, frantic music. I watched them again and again and I didn't know why. Brilliant MSPaint suns loomed over chopped and screwed image captures, pixellated and imperfect, of child actors.

One webmaster faked his own suicide via a supposed livefeed. I don't remember that we worried about him; we just acted as if it were performance art gone too far. It just had to be his attempt to out-sick the space that sustained him. He was probably experimenting with the definition of life, in a place where the boundaries of reality were up to perception.

Testing his own limits, and ours. We could try on never before-seen juxtapositions, we were given a fascinating new permission: to express things like humor, boredom, apathy or incredulity in the face of death. No one in the real world would ever catch you.

Chapter 8: Midnight Army

By the time I was out of high school, I was helping advertise for internet porn sites. Once, I even used my own photographs. It's not what you think, but it makes you want to read more, doesn't it? Click here, et cetera.

America Online's battalion of innocently-named chat rooms – The Meeting Place, The Lobby, The Cafe – changed tone as soon as the company let members start, name and maintain their own rooms. In user-led domains, people "went as" video game characters, as masters of BDSM, as constituents of every fetish under the sun.

It used to be you had to find pornography by accident, guiltily wait twenty minutes' download time to watch three minutes of a 1980s anime princess being visited by tentacles and techno music. In the chat rooms, sex and shock were the currency of the bored and languid. If you were asked whether you'd seen something, you always answered "yes."

Geographically-dispersed strangers had internet relationships and supposedly torrential love affairs, without ever having to reveal themselves. People would make melodramatic exits after their honor was besmirched or their parents suspended their internet privileges – only to reappear a few weeks later under a different screen name, pretending firmly not to be themselves.

Sometimes the chat companion who wanted to show you their fanfiction, their pictures, their videos, would urgently press you to click suspicious-looking links, until you realized they weren't a person at all. Spambots wielding bold pink comic sans and giant emoticons were everywhere.

I had – and still have – a friend named H. Joe who in the 1990s once mailed me a VHS tape of the homoerotic Japanese anime fighting saga *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. He hid a hard, pungent knuckle of weed inside the body of the cassette. My parents never found out. I don't think.

H. Joe's fulltime job was online, in the employ of a company called MaxCash, running spambots to promote porn sites. "Girls" with names like xLovelyToy32x would send messages to users lurking in chat rooms, inviting them to something *special*, generally occurring *right now,* and Joe would get paid for the traffic that the bots he operated lured to the sites.

It seems unreal now that people paid for porn in the first place, or that anyone online would believe an unsolicited IM full of alphanumeric garbage might truly be from a real-world teen sweetheart who *really* couldn't wait to talk. But back then, that illusion earned H. Joe his paycheck – and endless, incredible stories.

Each spambot in the personal collective he referred to as "The Midnight Army" had to have a real AOL account, which meant it had a real email inbox. Which meant that every time a lonelyhearted internet user who, thinking he (it was always, always a he) might have been solicited by a real erotic opportunity, wrote a love letter to XLovelyToy99x, Joe got to read it. Sometimes he'd write back. And often enough, he'd pilot the spambots personally, roleplaying along to entice the lurker-jerkers to spend more and more.

I helped, and I admit that even now I can't muster enough empathy to consider it cruel: 16, 17 year-old me, manning a bot account to take my turn at pressing some obtuse Midwestern Don Juan to divulge his most absurd fantasies. "I want to take soft paint brushes, dip them in warm massage oil, and paint your nipples," one man wrote to an internet porn bot before we started hearing from his wife: DO NOT CONTACT THIS ADDRESS EVER AGAIN! MY HUSBAND HAS A PROBLEM AND WE ARE STRONG IN FAITH or something like that. Oh, my. We contacted again.

H. Joe got monthly email updates from the mysterious figure behind MaxCash, known only by a pair of initials, on how the business was doing. Occasionally H. Joe was even eligible for rewards, like a special office chair with lumbar support. Implausibly these things were not scams. He received the lumbar support chair.

It was specialty focus that became H. Joe's primary earning avenue. It wasn't just that there were some men who preferred big, beautiful women (BBWs). It was they wrote elaborate, fetishistic fanfiction about feeding the fictional women, and would jump at any bot who had the right sort of name and intonation. It was that they were more interested in feet or body hair than who was attached to them.

"Sell me ur sox," people would message the spambots. I could make a fortune selling my socks online, and I didn't even have to *do* anything, suggested H. Joe. I never sold my socks, but I'd be lying if I said I was never tempted.

Once, though, curiosity or vanity or both compelled me to donate some webcam snaps of myself smoking a cigarette, the lit end blue in the camera light, lips pursed, flicking daintily, all that. Nothing more: Just pictures of me smoking.

H. Joe's "smoking fetish" subsite was really lucrative. We just needed to lock these guys in with a few pictures of a smoker who looked like a real-world girl. Of course I'd take some. No name on them; they would never be able to find me, see me, speak to me, touch me. Not even to *ask* to touch me. Way better than high school. Suckers.

Just a picture of me, smoking, late teens, fully clothed, was pornography to someone. My socks were worth money. This is what I had learned about men and sex from the internet by the time I had graduated high school.

Chapter 9: Seventh Heaven

I saw sex and death portrayed in graphic detail by the time I'd gotten my first real in-person boyfriend (from the internet, naturally). We grew up fast, in some ways.

I had gotten into some colleges. You don't want to go to college, said my mother. Yes I do, I insisted – everyone from that little town I grew up in was going to some college. My high school classmates had something to feel intellectually superior about for the very first time. Until senior year, I'd been made fun of for reading so much. Suddenly all the child athletes had the luxury to make an about-face. They were *into* academics. They were applying to choice programs.

In Advanced Placement English I said I thought The Catcher in the Rye was trite. "You're so *ignorant*," said this girl in soccer socks who didn't do computers, who'd never read another book. Hold me back, you guys.

It seems childish to hold that kind of grudge, but growing up internet is *weird* like that. It refracts the arc of human maturation through a prism, splitting it into discrete and vivid bands, layers of experience that pile up but never touch.

I messaged H. Joe just yesterday, and we spoke about a mutual internet friend from the 1990s who'd

got married and had a kid. He'd become boring and lost his spark, H. Joe reported, explaining the friend regurgitated a couple of our lazy old in-jokes, out of context, nothing else. Nothing further to say.

H. Joe still keeps tabs on all the old crew. One of them, a self-professed child prodigy who expressed his gifts by "hacking" AOL accounts and disseminating the usage statistics of various screen names, seems to be doing quite well for himself these days, according to LinkedIn. When we were kids we mainly knew him for his "adult baby" fetish – he hoped a woman from the internet would accept his apparently-copious financial recompense to pretend to be a babysitter or parental figure and swaddle him. I mean, that's not such an unusual erotic preference. According to the internet.

At any time, you can be living in a place that you truly believe is the knife's edge of the future, of revolution, and still be able to touch your own profound childishness. Even now you see it everywhere, among anyone who's exceptionally comfortable on the internet: Shark comics and singing cats, a hundred different fashions of Disney Princesses, devotionals to Captain Picard, a hero of our childhood. Internet boyfriends and girlfriends, intimacy with the convenience of distance, intimacy that never has to be challenged by the responsibilities of reality.

The internet has this fetish for baby animals acting like humans, or baby humans cuddling with animals. Everyone, everyone wearing diapers.

As for me, I ended up going to community college. It was a compromise I'd struck with my parents. If I tried living away from home for a bit, and got excellent grades at an inexpensive local school that let just about anyone in, after a year they'd consider the obscene cost it would take to send me to a "real" university education, they said.

I took everything I'd earned from one of my summer jobs and bought a fearsome PC, the only thing (to my mind) of import there was to bring to the dormitories with me. I wrote other students' papers for them in exchange for baggies of weed, and spent what felt like an interminable length my life on a quaint campus, in a tiny room, online, all the time.

It was the perfect place to notice the discrepancy between shiny tech progress and arrested development. I hung amid the slow rot of red and yellow leaves from New England trees and the lazy stink of being stoned all the time, in this perma-1999 where people seemed to sink ever deeper into inflatable furniture pretending to be futuristic space-chairs. Where I, and everyone I knew online, spent time pretending to be video game characters.

I wish I were joking. Japanese roleplaying video games usually begin in a small village: You're a boy, you tell your mother you're leaving home, you collect a friend, you strike out into the world. You reach the big city, and slowly you unravel some conspiracy, a corruption of the government or the ruling class. There's magic involved, as if the urges and evils that lie beneath the places power lives could be traced to concrete supernatural phenomena.

As a player in these roleplaying games, you "grind", which means to repeat simple or mundane tasks,

like slaying simple beasts, until you earn enough experience points to reach the next level, or to buy new equipment. You learn new skills, demonstrations of magic and summoning that become ever more elaborate the stronger you get – as a newbie you might be able to cast a fireball, but at level fifty-something, you can summon a water dragon that rides in on a tidal wave.

Areas of the world map that seem unreachable slowly become attainable as you earn vehicles or specialty creatures to ride. Nearly every game in the Final Fantasy series features an airship, promising that characters will always, eventually, attain the ultimate power and control over their world through flight.

That's what these games are about: Growing up, growing stronger, gaining power and knowledge. The final confrontation usually takes place against some kind of ultimate divine being, representing the final step in one's quest to grow and challenge the systems of adulthood. The "last boss" is God. Innumerable Japanese RPGs of my memory see their climaxes occur in some eternal dimension, on a far-flung satellite, in some soulscape outside of time. Like that's the only escape from the system, the grind.

To this day I remain impressed with my parents' foresight. I didn't want to go to college, it would be revealed after only one semester. I dropped out when I didn't get the part I wanted in the school play, and went to work as an admin in a local industrial park. Because I was saving money to meet my internet boyfriend, I also worked shifts at a truck-stop market, one of a regional chain, selling beer and cigarettes and packaged snacks to the townies.

In my free time, I spent hours enshrined at the computer, in AOL chatrooms with other lost kidults. I'd been doing it for years, by then. We named ourselves after characters from Japanese roleplaying games like Final Fantasy VII, simulated canonical meeting places, and roleplayed online every night – something resembling improvisational theater, with all the performances done in spontaneous text, using primitive dice-rolling macros to resolve disputes.

Even after subsequent installments – VIII, IX, X – in the Final Fantasy series had come and gone, we carried on playing in the nostalgic Final Fantasy VII universe, although it had gotten twisted beyond recognition. We leveled and rebuilt all the cities, and people continually invented new factions to accommodate the escalating whims of those who'd set themselves up as leaders. Most people just lurked around waiting to engage in theatrical fanfiction-cybersex.

In the gaps between playtimes, you could occasionally glimpse all our comparatively-powerless, childlike lives: Old enough to drink, but still living with our parents, or with someone who acted as parent. I knew far too many teenagers getting money and gifts from adults they knew online, via arrangements that seemed passionately dysfunctional and dark and beyond my ken.

We admired high-powered players and respected characters crowned in the florid regalia of chat room authority – even if we found out about their wearying daily trials, like trouble in school, getting fired from retail, their strained and lonesome marriages crumbling in middle America as hours passed in the thin square glow of escapism.

I know a guy who, even at the time of writing this, has a Facebook profile named after the faction he dutifully manned, day in and day out, throughout the waning of the 1990s. Many of us would eventually grow out of this stuff. Many of us wouldn't.

Chapter 10: The Grind

When virtual worlds and MMOs – massively-multiplayer online games – finally arrived, I thought everything would finally get good. Until the likes of EverQuest began to trickle onto the gaming scene, I thought that my online group's use of text play was a constraint we embraced only out of necessity. Like we'd all assemble graphical avatars, build three-dimensional play-places, if we could.

Well.

My generation was fed a fantasy of "the virtual" ever since the era of the Star Trek holodeck. Imagine, we thought, a featureless room wrapped in luminescent mesh, birthing programs that simulated reality so perfectly you could summon up your wildest fantasies and make them tangible.

The variation of science fiction I grew up with promised we'd attain all kinds of touchable hallucinogenic utopias, made possible by technology. Inside digital matrices, you'd be able to shape your self-presentation at will, transcend the boundaries and prejudices of landed Luddite life.

I entered my twenties following a string of films that glorified the idea that disempowered people would use the virtual world to break open this world and enter another one where their true gifts would be made manifest thanks to the super-magic of technology: The Net, Hackers, Sneakers, culminating in The Matrix.

By the new millennium our idea of wizardry had little to do with capes and wands, and everything to do with black leather, wearable tech, and the glamour of lightning-fast fingers weaving spells across glass and light, or the kind of cascading ASCII sigils, green-glowing on black, that I remembered from my childhood devotionals to the Apple][e computer.

It had begun even when I was young: The new surge in popularity for home gaming consoles in the late 1980s among privileged suburban kids meant a barrage of advertising targeting *cool* white boys on hoverboards, wearing wraparound VR helmets and Nintendo Power gloves. Wailing guitars! Sizzling red mesh. The first computer-centric kids' cartoon I can remember was ReBoot, which started airing when I was adolescent, featuring the stunning innovation of CGI animation, the first show of its kind. People "went in the game," became characters, lived humanoid lives inside of mainframes.

It had been prescribed since I was little, that someday "game" or "virtual world" would ultimately be not something you played with, but a place you could *go*. And just think of what would be possible, then!

The execution of that wish was clumsy, imperfect, needful. I was as hungry for it as anyone else, and yet. To buy in, at first, you had to purchase expensive software from the odiferous PC game aisle of Radio Shack, heavy tome-like boxes stamped with the same kind of sexy elves and cowled magicians that adorned the pages of the pulp fantasy I'd long since hidden in my parents attic (it would be years before I would admit to having read those things at all).

And it was confining, even relative to what I was used to. In the text society I'd helped build with far-flung weirdos in chat rooms, we would birth characters from our own childish power fantasies (or disempowerment fantasies, depending on your pleasure), lazily coupled with tropes from our favorite video games – think Sephiroth's *son*, who is *like* Sephiroth but only more *dangerous* and *insane*. Read any bad self-insertion fanfic and you'll get the idea.

Multiplayer online games demanded I pick a skin from maybe five or six skins, and next told me to sort out what numbers made my character what she was. *Numbers*, mathematics, my old bane, what are you doing here? This is supposed to be the *future*!

The numbers were everything. They decided what I could do, and as an avatar in an online game I was an unsettling, stiff-shouldered, sightless doll who was defined by how many small monsters she could kill to earn enough points to be able to kill slightly bigger numbers, and on like that. My character was only the sum of my behaviors. Bleak.

I wasn't dissuaded, not at first. After all, I suddenly had access to an entire living virtual country, populated by other people. Surely there was life outside the system. Surely.

The irony of being in a system, trying to find the life outside the system, a new meta-layer to the ways I had always interacted with machines, did not occur to me at the time. I didn't really spend long enough experimenting with online games to consider it.

Just a little time was enough – these endless, lonesome jogs across arid textures, where occasionally another player would clip past me, on a systematized quest for more identical roaming beasts to farm for resources. Translating the shorthand of the conversations people had with one another in the game's chat interface was momentarily diverting, until it turned out they were talking only about loot, statistics, hunts. The grind.

No story, or if there was one it lay out of reach: There were miles of creature pelts and upgradeable armors to be dealt with before you felt you could play a role in the narrative, in the ecosystem. Occasionally, some grand player crowned in high level spoils would soar by me on a featureless plain. *Who* are *these people*, I wondered bitterly.

The mystical characters that lurked at the outskirts of virtual cities, crowned with glowing exclamation points or halos or to-do bullets so you knew they were part of your mission, had nothing to say. If you brought them five of something, they gave you five of something else, and then asked you to hunt five more somethings.

We were told these games would become more lifelike, more personable: Now you can buy a house. You can buy furniture. You can get married. You can have a garden – gardens keep people logging in and "playing" more often, because otherwise their crops will die. This is the Real World's mundane labor, buried sneakily under a blocky graphical veneer of embarrassing fantasy novel.

I wanted it to work, so badly. I wanted a place to go live. But this MMO thing came out all wrong. I hated the onslaught of casual tourists, the loss of a private language, and what looked like a gross misappropriation of a pure ideal by mainstream consumers. I developed a ready answer for when people asked me why I didn't play online games: "I play games to get *away* from other people."

But fundamentally that isn't true. It's never been true at all.

Chapter 11: Drink More Ovaltine

Making things real, making them literal, fleshing them out, doesn't really enhance their meaning or their utility, does it.

By 2007 I had begun, in earnest, a career in writing about games and tech, much like my Dad had done when I was a child. I think if anyone had told me what an absurd dream it was, and how challenging and hostile the road would be, I never would have tried.

I'd never paused for thought before putting my fingers to keys, whether belligerently trying to establish a following for my Sailor Moon petition on Usenet, nor gawping blithely as a teenage E/N blogger, surrounded by grown-ups. These were paths I thought would *get me somewhere*, and I always got somewhere or other, intentionally or otherwise.

My career started when I found an editor who was willing to publish some columns on the "strange" games I'd found in my little trawls through the unlit parts of the internet: A Japanese-made "erotic maid training" game, an unsettling child-rearing simulator where you fathered a Princess and, if you were good at the game, married her – you know, things like that. Eventually my editor started offering me more "proper" work to do, including heading up a news subsite on the emerging virtual worlds sector.

"I don't really know anything about that," I told him. "No one does, really," he told me, and so I took the job.

I knew, maybe, more about that than I realized at the time. I'm not sure why I didn't recognize it. Toward the end of the millennium there'd sprung up an entire arm of industry, with significant associated financial investment, devoted to the idea of the "metaverse," or the "3D web". The early internet of my memories hung compass roses and architectural metaphors over all of the pages there were to visit; this movement was eager to revive the conception of the internet as a place where people could live. I understood that dream, in concept.

Rather than simply navigate to a website and click here, type there, supposing you could inhabit an avatar entirely of your own making, a digital self, and control them as they traveled along the information superhighway? Why browse ordinary old 2D shopping sites and click on what you wanted to buy, when you could walk your avatar, your ideal self, into a fully-fledged virtual store, try on virtual outfits, interact with a friendly virtual shopkeeper – perhaps even manned by a real employee, somewhere – and purchase virtual goods, the "meatspace" counterpart of which would also be delivered to your real-world house?

Trendwatchers were even more excited about 3D web technology in the workplace, like children playing "office" with their parents' printer paper and rubber stamps. You and your colleagues could be globally-distributed, decentralized, but each day, you'd log into an avatar in a virtual meeting space, watch web-streamed presentations in a virtual conference room full of virtual chairs.

Your imagination was the limit! You didn't even have to be human: You could come to work as a blue-furred anthropomorphic water buffalo walking on two legs, if you wanted. Your virtual house could be a giant Nautilus shell spangled with star-mobiles for your virtual pet to play with. Prejudices would be eliminated. Reality would no longer be a boundary.

Fast-forward from concept to execution: Well-intentioned but clueless executives tried to host technology meetings within the 3D virtual playground of Second Life, as pranksters and internet sex tourists flung giant penises at their presentation screens. Digital faces could accompany plain-old instant messaging windows, promised press releases about the future, neglecting to mention that all these cartoonish renderings and occasional winks and mouth-flaps that went on while you were typing would be more comedic than connective.

The "avatar-led virtual worlds" trend was brief. Unsurprisingly, if you want to buy something online, it's most efficient to go to Amazon and click on what you want. Far fewer people were interested in being an avatar than was expected; there was no immediately-efficient application for a virtual self. Second Life and its many short-lived alikes quickly went from the cover of Time Magazine to niche products, where adults applied "pose balls" to themselves in search of sexual outlets.

Researcher Nick Yee's 2013 book *The Proteus Paradox*, full of studies on how we use online games and virtual spaces, notes the depressing conundrum: When confronted with the possibilities of the virtual, most humans prefer – even require – the constraints of the real.

The first thing people make in an online world, when they can make anything, is a house. In Second Life's heyday, West Coast millennial dream homes sprouted all over the place like mushrooms: Seaside modern architecture with swimming pools, glass fronts, arcing ferns, natural wood. In a place where any ideal can be built, a depressing aspirational median emerges. Inside the house, all users put a chair. Why, Yee poses, do virtual worlds need chairs if virtual bodies never need to sit down?

The virtual worlds boom was still, of course, a theater of the strange like everything else I have loved,

but it was stripped of mystery. It was like holding up a high-detail mirror to your neighbors' bodies, nude and unadorned: The average human fantasy involves being a mannequin in a corset with animal ears and obvious sex organs, who lives in a West Coast dream home.

I wish I had never known that.

I began nurturing a natural distrust toward childlike tech-sector optimism, and an irrational resentment toward Neal Stephenson's book *Snow Crash*, which I credit with motivating all these people to believe in and desire the metaverse fantasy.

Still, there are worse things. I chased down intimate forums where they could still be found, wondering whether there were any great mysteries left to unpuzzle online. And as if summoned, suddenly there'd be some mysterious countdown clock, some set of puzzle clues, some unexplained constellation of evidence leading to the unknown. The collective ingenuity of internet lurkers would be sparked, would go to work.

There are marketers lying in wait to exploit your collective ingenuity. They call these endeavors "alternate reality games," and they talk genuinely of pleasurable brand engagement, of positive group action, as crucial cornerstones to their campaigns. This is a consumer-friendly use of game design and experience design; it creates community around the brand experience.

There is no equation, no cryptogram, no invented alphabet that a group of internet users cannot collectively solve, no message they can't disseminate to whichever extent they like. Remember childhood hunger, curiosity, the desire for mystery? Remember being the kind of kid who'd pry a loose wood panel off of your Grandmother's wall just in case there might be a secret passage there?

It's like on the movie A Christmas Story, where Ralphie sends away for a decoder ring because he genuinely wants to help Little Orphan Annie via the radio, and the message he unpacks is DRINK MORE OVALTINE.

The secret sadness that underlies the proliferation of interactive entertainment and technology isn't only that we may lose their mystery. It isn't only that we'll lose the pioneer feel of uncharted islands wreathed in newness, the half-finished thoughts of strangers surfacing in the distance. It isn't even so much that we may be disappointed by the thin realizations of virtual worlds and repetitive, static online games, or the barrage of social media.

It's that our appetites, wishes and fantasies are cool now, sanctioned and monetizable, and we are open to being exploited.

Chapter 12: Market Category

We were the first to see this new world born. We watched it become a nova that grew until its light touched everything, until shadows were hard to find. We grew up alongside it; the black and shining

faces of screens and their winking sigils sit alongside my oldest memories. We're part of that swelling arc and tide, and it's part of us in a way it cannot be for any generation before or after us.

Yet absurdly, modern geeks still have an inadequacy complex. An old grudge, like the vivid flicker that comes lazily to life in my belly when I remember being teased for trading anime soundtrack cassettes by mail with alias-wearing strangers online.

Tech culture has become a sick-makingly hostile space, a club of angry dudes who require you to recite all the passwords before you might be allowed, still under suspicion of cooties, into the treehouse. It's a space where adult men with fully-fledged families, when asked to include others, to diversify, to share, are still citing the bullying they received when they were young as the reason their insularity is so precious. They're still scared: Of girls, of popular kids, of losing the kingship over the sandcastle whose parapet it took them so long to crab-crawl their way to.

Why are there so few women in programming? Why do sexism and racism seem to be a more urgent and pronounced problem in technology fields than elsewhere? Why is it that when I finally accepted a seat in this world and raised my voice properly to be heard on the issues I've always loved, I experienced more viciousness and hostility than I ever did in the mundane Suburban Athletics world I left behind? And why does the community I always believed was mine deride these concerns as inconvenient, optional?

Stereotypes become a self-fulfilling prophecy, maybe. Remember the radical-dude boy with the hoverboard and backwards cap who was winning all the games in the neon ads and cartoons of the 1980s? If he was ever accompanied by a woman, or a person of color, those characters were only there to be awed by his achievements. The video games of our childhood sketched women as distant creatures, 2D princesses who never had enough presence of mind to stay in the damn castle until we got there, who were always being spirited away to some other one. All of the media, masterminded by marketing and rich-kid gadget sales, told us who this future belonged to.

And there are so many people out there in geek culture, in technology, in game design and development – *my people*, which is why it hurts so much – who, no matter how much they've grown up, no matter what they've achieved, still believe what marketers and loathsome norms told them when they were 8: *It's for boys*.

Somehow marketing got its hooks in: Home technology, not a portal to promise and possibility and humanity, but an adornment that means privilege. We always wanted the meek to inherit, so to speak. Surely, we have – and we are *still* able to be mobilized as a market category based on our fear of powerlessness. Geeks will buy hungrily into product culture, consume any bit of software, any lifestyle gadget that promises them they will never have to be rejected or made fun of again.

Games are cool now, promises the employee efficiency specialist quietly replacing genuine incentives in the workplace with little networks of points and badges. Gamers are the world's best problem-solvers, says the data-miner, channeling the collective ingenuity of the digital world's playful explorers.

Don't talk about politics, don't think about the world, don't become diverted by inconvenient questions about violence, or culture, just embrace the art of play. Don't worry about openness, don't worry about what other people think, haven't you spent enough time being afraid of girls and criticism? Be a proud geek. Press X to start, think about it later. You can now buy whatever you want digitally, and download it with one click. You can even earn rewards. It's just for fun, it's just for fun, it's just for fun.

Everything's a game now, and you like games, right? Say yes, under all circumstances, unequivocally, unconditionally. Otherwise you're a traitor. People will tell you you're not real.

I spent years daily visiting 4chan throughout my twenties, until the thrill of being a secret interloper in an antisocial boys' club wore off. "There are no girls on the internet," went the joke.

Yeah, there are. Some of us were here first, just so you know. I'm not buying it, any of it.

Chapter 13: What's on Your Mind

And so, says I, the internet made me who I am, or something.

…I almost feel like I could have carried that off, as a conclusion, maybe five years ago, but everything about how we talk and communicate online has changed. Any cranky fist-shaker can levy complaints about "our always-on society", or about Twitter and Facebook and other social media services swelling, like leaky arks, with things no one cares about, like "what a stranger had for breakfast," as the reductive little adage tends to go.

We're going to become so disconnected and superficial, neckerchief'd news anchors fret, in the same way they uneasily explicated "emoticons" or warned about child predators in online worlds ten years ago. Look at all these Indie Hipsters who are taking Instagrams of their food instead of talking to each other before they eat, look, look at all these half-naked soft-focus overdisclosure selfie-teens, looking into a phone, standing in front of a mirror.

Clive Thompson's book, *Smarter Than You Think*, suggests that our offloading of memory and correspondence onto these new infrastructures actually magnifies the cognitive capacity of humankind. Ian Bogost's 2013 article for The Atlantic on "Hyperemployment" counters that the average tech user's daily mental resources are being whittled away by constant, increasingly-inefficient email, and the minutiae involved in adding content to social networks and sharing platforms. Meanwhile, the tech giants that own these platforms that host and showcase our pictures, curated lists, and afterthoughts get rich off our uncompensated contributions.

Be careful what you put on Facebook, the climate warns, especially if you're young, because if you're seen to curse, drink, undress or otherwise express yourself too uncleanly and too honestly you'll damage your potential for employment. Surveillance culture looms – the government might be making

note of everything you say, so button up and be discreet, be professional, be good, be quiet.

Don't take too many pictures of yourself or your food, don't look like a narcissist, a fantasist or a self-mythologist, it's uncool. Respect the time invested by every stranger, lurker, or government snoop who might be reading what you broadcast out into the universe every time Facebook offers you a blank field querying, *What's on your mind?*

You're inundated with microinformation, the mass-management of miniature tasks. Is our intimacy being eroded, gasps an apoplectic op-ed writer who calls technology their "beat." *Is* our intimacy being eroded? We are more uncomfortably proximal to each other than ever.

A wall-to-wall Instagram reel of flirtatious young women doing selfies and documenting the gaps in their thighs isn't a zoetrope of inconsequential self-involvement, so much as a reclamation of the lens: The young and bewildered women who blinked innocently from the dark corners of the early web are holding the camera now, controlling their own images, setting the terms of engagement.

The Amazing Tip That Saved My Marriage used to be the kind of phrase that'd head up a spam message in your AOL inbox – now it's a sprawling personal essay from a not particularly qualified expert. It Happened To Me, shout new writers, many of them women, given a soapbox for the first time to write about assault, abortion, affairs, asylum, addiction, depression, transition, sex work.

It's an excess of self-disclosure – your life, your heart, your identity, is now the primary commodity in the new content economy. Viewed differently, it's activism: Formerly-voiceless people suddenly front and center, their piquant individual biographies proliferating faster than light across the infrastructure. No one can look away.

We want immediacy, yes, but that's only half the story: We also want to glut ourselves on endless daily human truths and secrets. It reminds me of a cartoon picture I once saw online in the old days showing sushi being served out of a woman's vivisected torso. The expression on her face was humble, vaguely embarrassed, blushing.

No one hunts for troubling and dark images anymore: The details of what a stranger's cousin did to her when they were six is now recommended reading on the sidebars of lifestyle sites. Except this time she maintains ownership. It bears her name. She maybe even earned money to write the article.

There's nothing I can really add. There is no tidy conclusion I can give you about how and where I ended up. Here we are, and I have said almost all of it already.

There is no mystery left, really.

Chapter 14: Bot Heart

Star Trek: The Next Generation was on when I was a kid, half-remembered, but now it's on Netflix. Revisiting it is uniquely disorienting: Theatrically-trained actors declaiming, striding across this late-1980s vision of the future, plush, with leather command-chairs and inexplicable blinking lights.

Underpinning it all is this Western-centric idea of humanity that might be problematic if it weren't so naive, so child-like: As a species, our pioneering spirit is supposedly indomitable, curious and just, and we must prove these traits with every interaction we have with alien races and mysterious space phenomena alike. It's a polemic on humanity's inherent humility and righteousness.

Many episodes focus on the character of Data, a humanoid android who has attained "sentience," as understood within the show's morally-conscientious parameters. In his service aboard the starship Enterprise, Data frequently explores the limits of his artificial intelligence, the difference between himself and people: The show's creators must have imagined him a plot device to challenge conventional, staid parameters of what constitutes identity, humanity.

Unsurprisingly, then, many episodes make indulgent forays into Data's hobbies and interests: Violin concertos, painting, pet care, theatre, literature, stand-up comedy. Even though the Enterprise is staffed by elite servicemen and women assigned to act as the front line against threats to the universe, the captain and his highest-ranking officers can always find time not to gaze into the mysteries of the cosmos, but to indulge Data's innocent experiments into human art and culture, and encourage him to learn about the wonder of *laughter.*

One of my colleagues jokes that people stationed on a ship constantly encountering impossible, nearly-lethal phenomena would constantly be "looking for a reason not to lose it totally." Data's childlike forays into child-like self-expression probably provide the crew with crucial diversions.

People still treasure the idea that there might be humanity in the automated, just as I did as a child mashing keys and petting modems. And just as the mainstreaming of the web provoked net artists to preserve link-based "navigation" as a beautiful act for its own sake, free of the yoke of corporate purposes, there are still pixel artists, glitch-manufacturers, bot designers and Twitter poets trying to capture it: Mystery. Texture.

Earlier this year everyone I knew was interested in an internet horse poet that was probably a robot.

Right? Feel that–?! Mystery, texture! The Horse_ebooks Twitter account dribbled what had to be accidental brilliance across the days and weeks from 2010 to 2013, robotic word-salad only occasionally about horses, interspersed with spam links.

Everyone fell in love. Horse_ebooks spawned imitators, arguably contributed to popular tone and syntax among creatives on social media. Gawker did a story about how the account might be manned by some elusive Russian recluse. That was romantic enough, but most people preferred to believe that it was possible for some distant robot to be blinking out accidental poetry, isolated, abandoned, unmanned.

When we're overwhelmed, we look to machines, hoping for evidence that 'soul' isn't some concept dependent on all our fleshly imperfections. They can show us that we aren't so special. Or that we are unquestionably special, whatever it is we need to believe.

Late in 2013 it was revealed that the Horse_ebooks Twitter account, and the similarly delightfully-accidental YouTube channel Pronunication Book, were manned by social media executives ostensibly seeding their next online project. I remembered when I refused to believe that hell.com was manned by "net.artists" –a conscientious, finite and certain human will behind these things suddenly makes them less magical, I thought.

There was an internet backlash, and people felt genuinely betrayed.

I think Horse_ebooks' Jacob Bakkila and Pronunciation Book's Tom Bender are people like me, broadly. They became internet execs, but still longed for the tactility, the earnestness in the edges of digital spaces alongside which we grew up. They saw online culture as a place where they should always be creating performance, art, mystery.

They aren't alone: Countless artists today romanticize the chunky graphics and sound of the early web. Netscape Navigator, Winamp, LimeWire, MIDI, Geocities, Guestbooks, AIM – all of it is now "retro" enough to be fascinating to an entirely new wave of youth, who mine it post-ironically, chops and screws it, mocks it while hungering for it, an age that probably flickers at the edges of their infant memories but never really existed, to them.

There are proggers and bloggers and hacktivists and pirates and tweeters, people who make brief and gut-punching social impact games in sixteen bits in a browser, or on the App Store, or on the Android market. Or who make text-only works, joining a surge of games made in a simple tool called Twine that lets people make interactive art, storytelling and spatial games through words and hyperlinks. Glowing phrases, urging the participant to engage.

To click, to tumble, to descend. To tangle with a machine until you don't know where it ends and you begin, until you think you might have found an illicit crawlspace between this world and one entirely other.

I am on a plane back to New York after some work abroad – this is my world now, lived in the in-between spaces of transit, hung over an impossible expanse of sea, racing the sun, going backward in time. Racing the lifespan of a netbook battery, urgently, lozenging every second until everything goes dark.

A baby is screaming two rows up. That's what babies do, because it hurts to be born, is terrifying. Every living second of growth is overwhelming, like every moment we offer to a machine suspended in mysterious space. Every thing I write in this moment will be a relic in that child's lifetime. Every single thing.

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